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AUTHOR	Cline, Larry; Kepner, Jim
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ABSTRACT

The Sumter Office of Economic Development and Central Carolina Technical College (South Carolina) formed a partnership to help increase the technical skills of the local work force. Industry surveys, questionnaires, and on-site visits revealed that employers were discouraged with the inadequate work force pool, and that those coming from secondary schools were not meeting employer needs. Through a collaborative process, the college was determined to be the most appropriate provider of technical training, and a curriculum was developed. Competencies also were established for general mechanical knowledge, fundamental mechanical functions, hydraulics/pneumatics, electrical, programmable logic controllers, and welding, with pre- and post assessment. With strong support from the business community and high participation rates, the college is improving both the local economy and the individual employment value of its workers. (YKH)

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The Community/Technical College and Community Economic Development: No Longer a Matter of Choice!

By Larry Cline and Jim Kepner
Central Carolina Technical College

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L. Cline

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The Community/Technical College and Community Economic Development: No Longer a Matter of Choice!

For several years many leaders in the community/technical college arena viewed job readiness and skill development as a by-product of the transfer function. Students were advised of a standard track consisting of general education courses and given relative assurance that they would transfer to four-year colleges. These assurances were frequently supported by a letter in the student's file indicating acceptance as evidenced by the signature of the department chair or dean. In fact, the notion of junior colleges was founded on the philosophy of preparing students for the four-year college or university terminating in a baccalaureate degree. If a student indicated that job preparation was the main goal, he or she would be referred to the Vo-Tech (Vocational-Technical) advisor who was generally in another building that housed welders, automotive hoists, and training boards.

Not so today!

The typical student at Central Carolina Technical College, a medium-sized two-year institution in South Carolina, is 28 years of age, a single parent, taking less than a full load of credit hours, working 15 to 20 hours weekly, and in need of entry level skills to gain access to the world of work. These students are aware of what employers are saying, and they have an appreciation that the four-year degree is not intended for everyone. In fact, many may never require formal education beyond the associate degree during their work career. In today's environment, the old rule of education, years of experience, degrees held, and courses attended, doesn't apply nearly as much as the possession of a meaningful skill.

As a result of rapid changes in technology and the methods through which we communicate, business and industry have the ability to shift their sights toward meeting the short-term needs for skilled workers. These workers are not available and in some areas this problem has yet to be addressed. The bell at the door of the two-year college is ringing and the shadows crossing the threshold are those of industry voicing their needs; and, they are demanding action.

At Central Carolina the bell was answered and the visitors were welcomed with open arms!

In July of 1997 a discussion occurred between the Project Manager for the Sumter County Economic Development Board, who is also a retired plant manager for Allied Signal Corporation in Sumter, and Vice President for Development at Central Carolina Technical College to determine what each was doing toward addressing the suspected problem of an exhausted work force pool. Jim Kepner, Project Manager, had been gathering data regarding the concerns of manufacturers for the past twelve months, and his findings supported the

suspicion of an insufficient work pool. He was planning to begin follow-up visits when Larry Cline, College Development Officer, contacted him. Realizing that a shallow work force pool diminishes the chances of attracting new industry and greatly impacts the possibilities for expansion, it was concluded that action was necessary and the likelihood of success individually was minimal. Therefore, a partnership was formed to develop a mission, collect data (ongoing; because information had been gathered over the past 12 months), and share values that would result in a growing economy and a skilled work force that was second to none in the state of South Carolina.

There were numerous assumptions considered during brainstorming sessions, and it was quickly discovered that the needs and remedies must be defined by the client (industry) not implied by education and community leaders. The most efficient and effective method to gather data had been proven to be a brief easy-to-complete survey, used by Mr. Kepner, that captured input ranging from finance, regulatory requirements, education, work force, livability, utilities, taxes, transportation, and skilled labor availability. In addition, there was a questionnaire developed by the College to assess the needs specific to training and education. To ensure participation in completing the survey, a letter of introduction and a scheduled time for a visit accompanied the questionnaire as in the past. The letter indicated the purpose of the survey and that their specific needs would be discussed. Of 40 industry visits, only one failed to complete the survey and that was due to a misunderstanding.

The visits to the industries lasted no longer than 45 minutes, and the majority of plant managers conducted in-depth tours providing a first-hand view of the work environment. The credibility of the partnership between economic development and the technical college began to mature and strengthen considerably. It took nearly three months to finalize all industry visits.

As the on-site visits were conducted, a trend was developing; all employers were discouraged with the insufficient work force pool to replace existing personnel, the lack of skilled workers was critical, those coming from the secondary schools were not meeting the needs of employers, and, the single greatest skill needed was the maintenance mechanic. A generalist was needed not a specialist!

It became glaringly evident that action was mandatory and time was not a luxury. In addition, if training was not developed by the College and the Office of Economic Development, industry leaders would go elsewhere to have their training needs addressed. At this juncture, it became evident that Central Carolina needed to be primary provider

of industry training and other resources should be coordinated through the College. Other providers would include industry personnel, Sumter County Career Center, Employment Security Commission referrals, and any contracted trainers.

Through a strong relationship with the industries by Jim Kepner and the results of the survey, 14 employers were invited to a one hour working lunch to determine the viability of a pilot project.

The results were astounding!

Thirteen industries pledged total support, approximately 58 participants were committed to the training, and it was determined there may be a need for two training sessions to be offered concurrently.

Central Carolina Technical College in cooperation with Special Schools* and industry representatives developed the curriculum including measurable competencies, level of difficulty, instructors, and a calendar for completion.

Due to the critical need for basic skills in maintenance mechanics, time was limited thereby requiring numerous meetings in a two-week period. Needless to say, follow-through by each component of the development team was critical to the success of the project. It was also recommended that initial trainees be selected from existing employees. This was accepted as the quickest way to provide trainees for the program.

All meetings included mechanic supervisors from the industries invited, representatives from Central Carolina, and the Director of Sumter County Career Center. The career center is a component of Sumter County School Districts 2 and 17, the secondary school districts in Sumter County.

Competencies were established for general mechanical knowledge, fundamental mechanical functions, hydraulics/pneumatics, electrical, PLCs (programmable logic controllers), and welding. Each competency was discussed in depth regarding proficiency level required and the measurement of proficiency following the training. Everyone agreed that a pre and post assessment must be conducted. Lastly, it was decided that Monday through Thursday 4 to 7 p.m. accommodated the majority of trainers and the training would last for 17 weeks. At the final count, there were 30 employees/trainees scheduled to begin in late January 1998.

Assessing the Sumter Community as it related to the concerns for an "Acceptable Workforce" led to brainstorming corrective actions using proven steps in Total Quality Management. Initially identified was a vision, followed by a review of the area work force climate. Voids were quickly recognized that indicated the need for addressing a process/system issue, thereby leading to a macro approach to a skilled work force.

The approach was simple in that it was established that Central Carolina Technical College would be the direct contact with the "Customer" (Industry) to determine specific needs. Under the "umbrella" of the College, all "providers" diligently worked together to provide the curriculum. This included the College, the Sumter County Career Center, Adult Education and secondary systems in the City of Sumter as well as the county. This first phase aimed at the College and Career Center exclusively to provide the instruction for the pilot program for industrial maintenance.

Reviewing the process and considering the dynamics of this undertaking, it has been identified that two fundamental revisions should be implemented for ease of planning and for optimum communications. First, the initial meeting should include both the plant managers and the maintenance supervisors to ensure agreement of needs, remedies, and commitment. Secondly, the discussions concerning competencies and skill levels might have been enhanced if a listing of generic functions needed for basic proficiency as a maintenance mechanic was provided prior to the initial meeting. This list would allow for a common point of departure for all participants to establish the curriculum. Lastly, due to the severe shortage of skilled maintenance mechanics, the target should have been narrowed to existing mechanics who have been evaluated as likely candidates to succeed in this training. Thereby permitting the second phase of training to focus on other present employees as well as recruited individuals who were unemployed or desired entry into this trade.

We firmly believe the partnership between Central Carolina Technical College and the Office of Economic Development is strong and will prove extremely valuable as the Sumter area prepares to cross the threshold of the new millennium.

The commitment to a skilled work force has been solidified, and it is believed that the ringing bell at the door of economic stability and growth has been answered!

*Special Schools is a division of the State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education to provide customized training for new and expanding industries in South Carolina.